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SUBJECT: MILITARY INTELLIGENCE CHIEF FIRED, REFORM PROGRESSING

¶11. (SBU) Summary: On April 24 Medvedev dismissed the 63-year old Chief of the GRU, General Valentin Korabelnikov. No official reason was given for the dismissal, but experts told us Korabelnikov's impending dismissal had been rumored for months. Korabelnikov was known to be a Soviet-style general who focused the GRU's efforts at countering the perceived threat from NATO, rather than terrorists, separatists, and other, more germane threats to Russia. As a result, the GRU performed poorly during the August 2008 conflict in Georgia. Korabelnikov also publicly opposed Serdyukov's proposed military reforms, although the experts said this was at best a secondary reason for his dismissal. Not much is known about Korabelnikov's replacement, Aleksandr Shlyakhturov, other than he is a career intelligence officer. Experts downplay the possible effects of Korabelnikov's dismissal on military reform, which took another step forward with the dismissal of 50 generals and colonels who failed a basic skills test. End Summary.

"Soviet-Style" GRU Chief Fired

¶12. (SBU) On April 24 Medvedev dismissed Army General Valentin Korabelnikov from the position of Chief of Russia's military intelligence agency, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), and Deputy Chief of the General Staff. Korabelnikov's deputy, Lieutenant General Aleksandr Shlyakhturov took his place. Korabelnikov received an honorable discharge and was awarded the Order of Service to the Fatherland, Third Class. Some experts believe he will receive a civilian job in the GOR, perhaps in the Security Council.

¶13. (SBU) While the Kremlin offered no official explanation for the dismissal, the experts told us there have been rumors of Korabelnikov's dismissal circulating for months. Deputy Editor-In-Chief of the Yezhnednievniy Zhurnal Aleksandr Golts told us that the GOR wanted more modern thinking in the military leadership. Korabelnikov was a very Soviet-style general, Golts said, and focused the GRU's efforts on combating the perceived threat from NATO. Under Korabelnikov, he said, the GRU spent little time focusing on Russia's real threats, such as Islamic fundamentalists, separatists, terrorists, and the Georgian army.

¶14. (SBU) Korabelnikov's outmoded thinking was blamed for the GRU's disappointing performance during the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, the experts said. For example, the GRU had little knowledge of Georgia's air defense systems, and several Russian planes were downed as a result. The GRU also did a poor job collecting signals intelligence.

Opposition to Military Reforms Not Decisive Factor

¶15. (SBU) While Korabelnikov opposed many of Serdyukov's proposed military reforms, and even published his criticisms in a report,

experts maintained this was not the main reason for his dismissal. His dissenting views, however, did not endear him to GOR leadership.

In a classic turf battle, Korabelnikov and other top GRU officials openly criticized proposals that would have placed GRU special forces brigades under district commands. There was also talk of placing GRU signals intelligence systems under the command of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Some even talked of liquidating the GRU and folding all of its assets into the SVR.

¶6. (U) Local press also pointed out that Korabelnikov is 63 years old, three years older than the mandatory retirement age for military officers. (N.B. For a soldier to remain in service after the age of 60, the President must sign a decree to extend his contract.)

Shlyakhturov Likely a Temporary Replacement

¶7. (SBU) Little is known about the 62-year old Shlyakhturov, other than he is a career intelligence operative. Experts believe that he is most likely a temporary replacement; Medvedev is expected to name someone else to head the GRU within a few months' time.

Korabelnikov's Firing Not a Victory for Military Reform

¶8. (SBU) Experts have downplayed the effect Korabelnikov's firing will have on Serdyukov's military reforms, which at any rate appear to be slowly moving forward. On April 28, the MOD Examination

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Committee tested 249 generals and colonels who occupy flag-officer positions on basic military skills such as strategy and tactics, weapons proficiency, and physical fitness. Fifty of those tested will be dismissed from service due to their poor exam results. One hundred thirty-three high-ranking officers will be rotated out of their positions in Moscow to units in Russia's provinces, where the cost of maintaining them will be significantly less. Only 66 will keep their current Moscow-based positions. Deputy Defense Minister Nikolay Pankov said these cuts were part of the MOD's plans to discharge 36-37,000 military officers in 2009.

BEYRLE